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A
S E R M O N

PREACHED AT THE
OPENING OF A CHAPEL

I N
MARGARET-STREET, CAVENDISH-SQUARE;

And the Introduction of a
L I T U R G Y

On the Universal Principles of
RELIGION AND MORALITY.

On *Sunday, April* 7th, 1776.

By D. WILLIAMS.

L O N D O N :
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Hebrews x. 25.

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.

THE entire profligacy and destruction of a people are effected by a neglect of those means by which they were originally led to virtue and glory. Some of those means ; like most of the instruments of human wisdom ; will not bear the examination of reason : and though they may have effected wonders, from the misapprehension or superstition of the people, they may also have had some circumstances about them extremely ridiculous and absurd. These circumstances are not discerned in the early state of so-

cieties, when the principles that animate them are warm and impetuous. The end in view was generous, and noble ; and the heads of men had not yet learnt to chuse the means, by which their hearts were to be gratified. The early periods of society, like those of human life, are times of action, not of disquisition : and as the heart has generally proved a better guide than the head ; and rendered the youth of a man more virtuous, though less knowing, than his age ; so in communities, the first periods have been virtuous, under the direction of the public passions ; and the last have been profligate and vicious, while they abounded in knowledge and philosophy.

I do not propose to explain this matter ; and no man who has heard and read
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of former times ; and who will look about him, and consider the present, will, I think, dispute the fact. In so limited a disquisition as a public discourse, it is sufficient to ascertain the fact ; and to make such uses of it, as may serve the views of our assembling together, at this time.

One of the principles which animated our brave and virtuous ancestors ; which gave a sublimity to the savageness of their virtues ; impelled them to actions of disinterested patriotism, and gave wisdom to their legislation and policy, at which we are astonished---was Religion. Their descendants, improved in all the arts of life ; intelligent in the principles and interests of society ; adorned with names which science and philosophy will hand down to eternity---are advancing

to a political decrepitude and destruction,
from a strange and wretched irreligion.

This, I have no doubt, will appear a paradox to some of my hearers, who have been accustomed to annex ideas to religion, which belong only to prepossession and superstition. “ What ! are the free
“ minds of philosophers to be brought
“ again into the trammels of priestcraft ?
“ Are the first spirits and geniuses of
“ human nature to suspend that industry
“ which advances knowledge, by certain facts and experiments, in order to
“ crouch at chimeras, to estimate theological shadows, and split distinctions
“ *in infinitum*, in the wretched jargon
“ of metaphysics ? ” --- God forbid ! --- I will not make invidious comparisons between the present taste for facts, which
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often float like unconnected atoms in the brain ; which lead to no proposition ; and may in time render our philosophers incapable of forming a proposition----and those ages in which men dealt only in propositions, deductions, similes, and metaphors, without knowing any of the facts on which they were grounded. The labours of ingenious and great men should ever be treated with respect ; and their extravagancies and follies with candour and indulgence. The absurdities of theology and metaphysics were blended with principles which should secure our predecessors from contempt ; as our present pursuits may be secured from the ridicule of posterity by here and there a fact or an experiment which may lead to some useful truth, or be of some benefit to the world.

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When I take up the cause of religion, I do not mean any particular mode of it. I look upon the modern Atheist, who sees nothing but the operations of nature and chance, and who believes, there is no God ; to be as' inexcusable for his irreligion, as those who believe, *there are Gods many* ; and who think they see their operations in all the concerns and busineses of life. If I believed there was no Supreme Being distinct from *Nature*, I should adore Nature as I do God--- and if I went further, and could have the assurance to imagine that things are not always as they might have been ; and are not ordered according to my ideas of perfect wisdom and goodness ; yet as it is wonderful, that things should be so well as they are ; and that in the sum of existence there should be so much happiness

piness as to make it desirable---this would claim my respectful attention---and this attention would be all the religion of of which I should be capable. On this subject we have nothing to do with the various opinions which have been generated by poetry, superstition, and idolatry. It is not material to our purpose, whether the Atheist excludes the word God out of the world ; and ascribes all we see to Nature, Necessity, or Chance : or whether the Deist succeeds in establishing his opinion, that God is a spirit distinct from nature, and producing these effects by the operations of his will : or whether we go further, and with the several Prophets and Founders of religions, render him more similar to the best ideas of human nature ; give him a person ; and even affections and passions---it is

the moral character which we ascribe to him is the most material ; and the quantity of good and benefit which in our opinion is produced by that principle ; that being, or those beings, which actuate and regulate the universe. If we observe that the world and all the beings in it are formed with wisdom, that every want may be supplied, and every desire gratified, by an infinity of provisions, which seem to imply the greatest goodness in the Being who made them : this will be sufficient to all the purposes of religion. All enquiries into the nature of that Being whose works only we can see, are fruitless ; *for none by searching can find him out.* Piety therefore consists in attention to the works of God ; and to the power, wisdom, and goodness which they exhibit. This cannot be done without

out delight, gratitude, and virtuous resolutions---without an intention to act in our little spheres, in some degree according to those great principles we have been contemplating. In public worship, these pleasures and resolutions receive an increased strength, from those social affections which are the most powerful principles of our nature.

It is here that philosophy and philosophers seem to be defective ; and very justly to come under the reproach and even the execration of the people. They search with unremitting diligence into the works of God ; not a weed can grow ; not a pebble can be picked up ; but they examine its formation and uses. Many of them, however, examine only with a view to private gratification, or private glory.

A secluded and inquisitive life has destroyed, in some philosophers that natural and social principle which we always observe in an intelligent child ; who communicates with alacrity all his little discoveries ; and with the amiable view of diffusing his wonder, and multiplying his delight. In the first simple, and pure ages, we may imagine that the lessons of philosophy were so many acts of public worship. The wise man laid his discoveries before his neighbours ; called on them to share in his delight ; and bid them copy in their actions some of the wisdom and goodness which they saw. Philosophy is now too distinct and selfish a profession ; and its pursuits and discoveries are therefore not considered by the people as having any influence on the virtue or happiness of the world.

A much inferior class of persons to those I have now mentioned come also under the reproach in my text. They sometimes go under the denomination of *Free-thinkers* ; but they deserve not the appellation. They are distinguished by a certain libertinism, both in principle and practice : they have thrown off the doctrines of religion, not because they were properly convinced of their falshood, but because those doctrines were restraints on their vices. They first became profligate and then infidels. We mean to take no notice of such men.

There are others, who by fair and candid enquiry have supposed all the religious modes of faith, to be equally the inventions of men ; and that true religion consists now only in what it ever

did, piety, justice, and temperance. The fury and barbarity of religious zeal have been so great, that they have been very cautious in the steps they have taken to claim their undoubted right of worshipping God according to their consciences. They have complained that public worship has not been left, as the sciences have been, to be altered and improved as men advanced in knowledge. Indeed, there have not been many fair experiments made to prove this. Religion has been laid hold of by the state, as an expedient to serve its purposes ; not generally and nobly countenanced, as the means of making men good and happy subjects, by making them virtuous.---A variety of sects have sprung up, who have not only relinquished the advantages held out by the state, but dared its displeasure.

pleasure. Here genuine and virtuous *Free-thinkers* might have hoped for shelter ; if they had not spirit enough to assert their own rights. No. All the various denominations of dissenters have sprung up from points of belief ; and no sect has ever asserted the indisputable right of man, not only to think for himself, but even to *disturb the sacred repose of the publick* so far as to attempt its improvement and advantage. All religious contentions have been about the comparative excellence of theological tenets. An Arian or a Socinian, might perhaps venture some inconvenience from the more orthodox Calvinist---Why ?---Not merely because he felt himself entitled to a common right of human nature ; but because his faith was more rational or more scriptural ; fitter to be the established

blished religion ; and to receive the dignities and emoluments of the church. Put any of these denominations into power ; and you will only exchange tyrants ; and have new names and tenets, to which you must sacrifice your integrity and liberty. The warfare of religious sects has however produced, what they never intended, a *spirit of universal toleration*. It is to avail ourselves of this spirit, that we call on those who have deserted our public assemblies, and by their example injured the morals of the people, to discharge those duties which they are at liberty to discharge ; and the omission of which is their reproach. Would the name of Free-thinker be scandalous, if Free-thinkers were to act on their principles ? Is any honest man of any opinion despised, who acts from his
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real principles ? And will any degree of wisdom screen a man from just contempt, who skulks under pretences, for fear a miserable and ignorant wretch should call him by some name which is rendered opprobrious only by such cowardice as his own ?

Every man who is at all distinguished by his understanding or knowledge, has a number of people who look up to him, and are affected by his example. If they see him neglect the duties of public worship ; their conclusion is, that they may do so likewise ; for a man of his understanding must have good reasons for his conduct. This truth may be illustrated in England ; not by private instances only ; but by means of parishes and provinces. When the country gentleman resided on his estate ;

tate ; and had so much religion as to attend his church ; all the parish followed his example ; the people were put in mind of their duties ; and their morals were regular and good. At present, if a gentleman occasionally visits his estate, he never attends any kind of public worship. The consequences almost universally over England are, that the churches are deserted ; and the people profligate and abandoned. They have no method of frequently recollecting their religious and moral obligations ; and the motives and reasons of a virtuous conduct are never laid before them. The general dissoluteness and wretchedness of the people are to be attributed principally to these causes.

It seems to be our duty therefore to attend the offices of public worship, because

cause we may thereby make the best use of our knowledge in the works of God, by rendering the wisdom and goodness they discover, the reasons of a moral conduct : we may keep up the most pleasing kind of society with our fellow-creatures ; do them service by our examples ; and assist in counteracting that universal profligacy which is destroying all our public and private virtues. Vice has her associations in every street : under various denominations, there are public nurseries of all kinds of profaneness and iniquity. Our youth, after a trifling and superficial education ; after exchanging their prejudices abroad, for foreign principles and foreign infidelity,----if any thing be wanting they are there perfected in iniquity.---Speak to these people of your religion. You, who have spent your

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thousands in the education of your son ; and who see nothing for it ; but that he can speak trifling things in the trifling language of a neighbouring country ; speak to him of the offices of religion, and ask him to go to church ; he will smile at your folly, and hasten to these temples of vice. If the old ground of mysteries and creeds be not tenable, why should it not be quitted for better ? Because our youth can laugh at our prejudices---are they to run headlong to destruction for want of some means of putting them frequently in mind of their most important duties ? In our present situation, we should desert the outworks, and fly to the citadel ; for the enemy is there already,

It may be said---that if we confine our public services to the most important mo-

tal duties, they are so well understood, that it would not be worth while to attend a public service in order to have them discussed. I am far from thinking that men who devote their time to the pursuits of knowledge, may not often furnish reasons of a wise and moral conduct which may be new to the most intelligent of their hearers. But supposing this were not the case: our dispositions and conduct, good or bad, are produced by habits; not by principles. If we are so circumstanced, that we generally hear only the apologies for vice, we become vicious; and to make us virtuous, it is necessary that we should not only understand the propositions of moral philosophy, but that they should be frequently laid before us. What is the reason that wise men act foolishly; and good men

men wickedly? Not for want of knowledge; but because the reasons of a good conduct are not always fresh in their mind. If public worship were only a recital of the most common obligations; it would be of the utmost use---in giving a habit of thinking justly; and a kind of security against many of the temptations of vice.

It is to answer some of these purposes, that the liturgy we have now used is offered to the public. It is a specimen of that kind of public service which I am sure is exceedingly wanting. Not one in five; perhaps not one in ten in this vast city, goes with any decent regularity to a place of public worship. The people in general have no reason to give, but the examples of those who are wiser and better than them-

themselves. The persons who give the example, alledge objections against the established forms, as being full of mysteries and creeds; and against the dissenting method of worship, as a faint and insipid resemblance to the enthusiasm of those times when the dissenters imagined their effusions were uttered by the Holy Ghost. Attempts have been made to reform established customs; but they have proved fruitless. The only thing left, is to endeavour to *assist them*, by providing for those circumstances to which they are not suited. Many thousands might be benefited; prevented from falling into vices, and assisted in forming habits of virtue---by such a public service as we have read; who would not, and perhaps could not, attend any other. If respectable societies were formed on the pure
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and simple principles of morality, the advantages would be very great. Even those persons who adhered to the old establishments would find their account in encouraging such societies, as they might be pointed to as proofs, that men may drop their prejudices about mysteries and creeds, and yet retain sufficient and indisputable reasons for every duty to God and man. It would be the object of such societies; not to reform other religious sects, but to assist them in preventing the public ruin. Religious assemblies and churches do not want reformation, if their people are sincere. It is that vast multitude, who attend no church, and have no religion, which ought to be reformed.

With these views, and only these, the present form of worship is offered to the
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publick. We hope to avoid contention with religious parties ; we want not to reform them ; we want not to interfere with them : we wish to assist them in what should be their principal design, improving the minds and manners of the people. They are in possession of their flocks ; we would pursue none, but those who are out of all inclosures.

We have no desire, however, to separate ourselves from good men of all denominations ; of all religions ; and of all nations. We have endeavoured to compose our Form of Devotion, so as to admit every honest man in the world to join us ; and we could wish all good men had so much liberality as to consider this method of joining in a general service, as a proper preparation for that heavenly world ;

world ; where they must suppose, that all distinctions of parties will cease ; and that all honest men, of all Christian denominations ; all good Deists, Jews, Turks, and Heathens, shall unite in one form of worship, and be animated by one general principle of benevolence. In the present state of the world, education, custom, the laws and ordinances of society, form us into parties. We see, however, that there are general duties and sentiments, which suit the whole world ; and which are the ground of that noblest of all human affections----UNIVERSAL BENEVOLENCE.

If we extend our imaginations to Heaven ; or to any world superior in excellence to ours ; and suppose its glorious inhabitants assembled to worship God :---

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can it be on any of the defective and narrow plans for which we now contend ; and not on those general principles in which every creature of God can join ?--- We ought at least now and then to engage in such services as may unite us to *all* our brethren ; and if we should all meet in Heaven, prepare us to receive with affection good men of all opinions, and of all nations ; and to join them with pleasure in the worship of our common Creator.

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